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Special National Intelligence Estimate

Implications of the Military Balance of Power in Lebanon

Key Judgments

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**IMPLICATIONS OF THE MILITARY
BALANCE OF POWER IN LEBANON**

KEY JUDGMENTS



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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Incremental application of US and/or Israeli military power will not induce a major shift in Syrian goals in Lebanon. Breaking Syrian influence in Lebanon would require a major ground offensive designed to force Syrian troops out of the country. Failing this, the Syrians will continue to play the dominant role in Lebanese politics, maintaining veto power over the national reconciliation process and implementation of the 17 May agreement.

US naval gunfire in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in September succeeded in thwarting Syrian attempts to prevent extension of President Gemayel's authority. Confident that no resolution of the Lebanese crisis can take place without its acquiescence, however, Syria has shifted its tactics from overt military confrontation to political maneuvering. Despite recent air attacks and naval gunfire on Syrian positions, Damascus remains willing to confront challenges to Syrian positions in Lebanon. Moreover, despite some tactical shifts, Syria appears unwilling to back down from its primary goals: a Lebanon responsive to Syrian interests, free from overt ties to Israel, and the removal of the Multinational Force (MNF).

Syrian influence in Lebanon remains extensive. Syria has assets in virtually all sectarian and political groups throughout the country. Increased US and continuing Israeli involvement has done little to shake the conviction held by many Lebanese Muslim factions that Syrian support is necessary to preserve their hopes of scoring political gains in negotiations with the central government. Indeed, Syria may successfully exploit US and Israeli actions to further polarize domestic Lebanese factions. Moreover, Damascus's ability to intimidate Lebanese politicians remains an important element of Syrian influence in Lebanese politics, one that would continue even without the presence of its Army.

Syria's assets in Lebanon include Iranian militants and Palestinian radicals, whose terrorist activities, at a minimum, are indirectly supported by Damascus and serve Syrian goals.

The recent Israeli air raids send a message to Damascus that, despite Israel's withdrawal to the Awwali River, Israel remains deeply concerned about Syrian intentions in Lebanon. There is, however, little enthusiasm in the Israeli Government or the public at large for broader military involvement in Lebanon in the absence of specific Syrian,

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Palestinian, or radical Lebanese provocations. Israel remains concerned that it could get incrementally dragged back into an unprofitable and costly conflict in Lebanon. Israeli military efforts are, therefore, likely to continue to be limited to retaliatory strikes.

The Israelis have undertaken a range of political/military efforts to deter the Syrians, and these will probably continue. Efforts to weaken the Syrians by influencing various Lebanese confessional groups—particularly the Maronite Christians, the Druze, and the Shias—as well as efforts to highlight US, Israeli, and Lebanese political cooperation, will probably continue to form the basis of Israeli policy in Lebanon for the near term. While these limited Israeli efforts are designed to please the United States as well as address Israeli Prime Minister Shamir's concern about Syrian strength in Lebanon, many Israeli cabinet members are prepared to acknowledge the reality of Syria's historically influential position in all but southern Lebanon.

Extensive Syrian political and military provocations might prompt renewed Israeli military involvement in Lebanon. The prospects for significant Israeli military activity, however, are slim, given powerful opposition by the Labor Party and significant elements within the coalition.

In fact, we believe Israel is willing to settle for the de facto partition of Lebanon, with Israeli forces maintaining a presence in the south indefinitely. We further believe Israel and Syria could eventually reach a tacit agreement to limit military activities across the cease-fire lines, but each would try to keep pressure on the other to withdraw.

Ideally, the Israelis would like the Lebanese Government to assert its authority by reaching a political deal that would allow the LAF to take over Beirut and the southern suburbs and perhaps the Shuf and southern Lebanon as well. Muslim militiamen, however, would resist any Army moves and many Shia soldiers—about 25 percent of the Army—would probably desert if substantive political accommodations were not reached in advance.

Out of desperation, Gemayel could even decide to send the Army into west or south Beirut or elsewhere without a prior political deal. We believe this would cause widespread desertions by Shia and Sunni members of the Army, probably leading to the Army's collapse and the end of the national reconciliation process. Attacks on the MNF by disgruntled Muslims would increase sharply. The United States would be left with the choice of supporting a Christian government widely viewed as entirely illegitimate by most Muslims or of withdrawing abruptly from Lebanon.

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In the event the US and MNF contingents withdrew abruptly without a political agreement between factions, the Gemayel government would have little choice but to accommodate the interests of its Lebanese rivals and Syria. We do not believe Israel would be willing to save Gemayel once US forces depart. If the government did not reach an accommodation, it would ultimately collapse and major fighting would result, the Army would be likely to fragment, and the de facto partition of Lebanon would take place. Under these circumstances, Syria would reemerge as the dominant force in Lebanese politics in all areas except southern Lebanon.

More likely is the continuation of a weak central government that can maintain control over some parts of Beirut but has to contend with autonomous Druze and Maronite sectors and prolonged Syrian and Israeli occupation. The facade of central government authority is likely to continue, however, because no party favors formal partition. A de facto cantonal or confederal system might emerge—one that could meet the essential interests of most internal and external participants. The Maronites will opt for de facto partition rather than accept significant dilution of their political control.

Increased US and Israeli involvement has had some impact on Damascus. The Syrians have shifted the focus of their efforts to the political scene. The US airstrikes may have led the Syrians to conclude that they had underestimated the extent of US support for the Beirut government. Similarly, Israel's airstrikes may have caused President Assad to reassess his belief that Israeli domestic problems have effectively tied Shamir's hands and caused him to scale back Israeli goals in Lebanon.

Syria wants to avoid a direct confrontation with Israel or provoking expanded US military involvement, but President Assad believes that he can afford to pay a higher price than either the United States or Israel if the conflict escalates. Assad also believes that he can achieve his minimum goal of preventing the installation of a Phalangist-dominated government in Beirut allied to Israel and can force the Gemayel government to shelve the 17 May accord. In the event of sustained US and/or Israeli military pressure on Syrian surrogates and Syrian positions in Lebanon, Syrian-supported terrorist attacks on central government, Phalange party officials and US targets in Lebanon would increase.

Assad's recent hospitalization has caused some uneasiness among his inner circle and led to maneuvering among potential successors. We do not believe Syrian decisionmaking has been significantly impaired,

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however, and we doubt that Assad's health—unless it deteriorates substantially—will be a major factor in Syrian policymaking on Lebanon in the near term.

Greater US and Israeli involvement in Lebanon without domestic political accommodation is likely to polarize Lebanese politics. Pro-Syrian groups and even moderate Muslims are critical of the US role and probably fear that the United States and Israel hope to maintain in power a narrowly based Christian-dominated government that would grant only cosmetic political concessions to non-Christian groups. Anti-US sentiment among many Muslim groups—moderate and radical—will continue to grow as long as Gemayel makes no significant political concessions and the United States supports expanded use of the Lebanese Army against the Muslims.

The Maronite Christian community sees heightened US and Israeli involvement as a commitment to continued Christian control and, without heavy pressure, is unlikely to make substantial political concessions to Muslim and Druze groups. The national reconciliation process is likely to remain ineffective.

Gemayel could put together a plan to extend government authority and try to wean dissident groups away from the Syrians by offering substantial political concessions in the national reconciliation framework. Even if he favored this course—or if he came under strong US pressure to make such concessions—his Christian constituency would resist changes that significantly reduced its power and probably prevent him from implementing reform measures. Israel likewise wishes to maintain essential Christian domination of the country, although it would be willing to see some power sharing, particularly with the Druze.

Soviet military support for Assad has increased greatly over the past year and has contributed to his assertiveness in Lebanon. Moscow's support for Assad's policies in Lebanon has definite limits, however, and we believe the Soviets have made it clear to Damascus that they do not consider themselves obligated to protect the Syrian presence there.

Despite such reservations, Syria remains Moscow's key to influence in the region and, as Soviet officials have warned the United States recently, the USSR would have no choice but to support Damascus in a crisis. Moscow would be likely to take a number of steps to bolster the Syrians if their positions in Lebanon came under intense military pressure from Israel or the United States. The Soviets probably would:

- Issue authoritative but ambiguous public warnings of Soviet counteractions if Israel and the United States did not ease their pressure.

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- Augment Soviet naval and naval air presence in the eastern Mediterranean.
- Increase intelligence sharing with the Syrians.
- Increase deliveries of military equipment to Syria.
- Dispatch high-level military and/or political delegations to Damascus.

As long as the level of hostilities did not pose a grave threat to the continued Syrian presence in Lebanon, we believe that the Soviets would refuse any requests from Damascus to use its SA-5 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). In a major war in Lebanon, involving US, Israeli, or Syrian forces, however, because the distances are so short as to blur territorial distinctions and control of the air so crucial to victory, SAMs in western Syria almost certainly would become involved. We believe that in this scenario the Kremlin ultimately would sanction the missiles' use—if they had not already been destroyed—despite its realization that the Israelis then probably would destroy the missile complexes. Moscow almost certainly recognizes that refusing to fire the missiles while the Syrians were in such obvious need would undermine the USSR's position in Syria and thereby throughout the Middle East.

In response to the destruction of the SA-5s the Soviets probably would rebuild the complexes (and possibly construct additional ones) and strengthen their defenses with other SAM units and perhaps Soviet combat aircraft—once major hostilities had subsided.

Beyond advisory and technical support, we do not envision Moscow's providing direct ground support to Syrian forces in Lebanon under any circumstances. If the Soviets were convinced that Israeli ground forces were preparing to cross into Syria, they might dispatch to Syria token contingents of fighter aviation units and/or an airborne force and deploy them far from the fighting. Soviet efforts would be designed to jolt Israel and the United States into reconsidering their advance because of the increased risk of confrontation with Soviet forces.

Even a complete Israeli and Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon would not end Lebanon's troubles, or bring an end to external meddling. As long as Israel and Syria remain in conflict over broader regional issues, they will see Lebanon as an arena of conflict and compete for influence there. The Lebanese Army will not be able to fully control the country's internal security for some time and, even if the Syrian military were forced out, a relatively large international peacekeeping

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force would be required to ensure that they did not seek to return. Syrian political influence would still be considerable.

Greater US and Israeli military and political involvement in Lebanon is likely to increase moderate Arab bitterness at the open US alignment with Israel and could even build support for Syria. Most moderate Arab leaders are unhappy with Assad and would privately enjoy seeing him humbled. In the wake of recent US airstrikes, however, many moderate Arabs regard the United States and Israel as acting jointly in Lebanon in accordance with a new US-Israeli strategic cooperation agreement. The impact of moderate Arab reactions, while manageable in the near term, could be damaging to US regional interests in the longer term, especially if future US military actions were undertaken in concert with Israel. Arab moderate support for Syria would increase if Syria were under attack from Israel, and this support would considerably strengthen Syria's hand in opposing US and Israeli influence in Lebanon.

Open and direct US cooperation with Israel against Syria in Lebanon would undermine already flagging European willingness to continue in the MNF. All three participants would see such action as a fatal compromise of the MNF's peacekeeping role and an incentive to retaliate against their forces. Unilateral US action would prompt different reactions; the French and perhaps the British would be prepared to accept US action, but the Italians probably would not back such a move.

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